

Mansfield Center, Ct.
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To the Editor:

Must The Carnage Continue?

This week's lead story on *60 Minutes* brought us yet another tale of a young life snuffed out by a gun, as a 28 year old Marine, Clay Hunt, tormented by guilt, emptiness, and PTSD, shot himself. Earlier in the week, a 47 year old grandmother, Debra Dennison, another tortured soul, shot herself and her two young grandchildren in North Stonington. Ms. Dennison was known to suffer from DID, Dissociation Identity Disorder, (previously called Multiple Personality Disorder). Both Hunt and Dennison had been identified and followed by mental health professionals. Tragically, both had ready access to firearms and used them self destructively.

In the wake of the Newtown tragedy, there has been much debate about where to focus our attention and dollars in order to prevent the recurrence of such horrific events. Many have argued that our mental health system is the problem, that identifying and treating potentially homicidal and suicidal individuals is what we need to do to prevent another Sandy Hook. The Hunt and Dennison cases are stark illustrations of the futility of this approach. Beefing up the mental health system is not the answer. The filter is simply too porous. As a Board Certified Family Physician who practiced primary care medicine for 37 years, I am among the many clinicians who have been totally blindsided by a patient taking his/her own life or someone else's or committing some other form of domestic mayhem with use of a firearm. The best and most experienced physicians and mental health professionals will share similar stories—it is simply impossible to always know when someone at risk is ready to pull the trigger.

Still, we as a society continue to struggle to enact even the most rudimentary controls over access to firearms. Despite the fact that the likelihood of death to self or family member or acquaintance from a gun in the home far exceeds the chance that a domestic weapon will be used successfully to thwart an intruder or aggressor, we continue to accept non accountability for owning and storing firearms at home. Any hunter who considers himself a sportsman would be embarrassed to admit he mowed down a deer with an assault weapon, yet we continue to allow free access to and sale of these weapons of mass destruction. We are faced with a massive public health problem with deaths from guns now approaching or exceeding deaths from auto accidents and influenza, yet we pay to register our cars on a regular basis and spend millions of dollars studying and preventing the flu, all the while stifling research into the gun problem.

I concur with the call for the ban on assault weapons and the multi-bullet magazines that feed them, as well as the tightening of background checks on all purchasers of firearms. These measures should be enacted on a national basis, as interstate commerce renders state statutes less effective. We also need to do what we can to improve our mental health system although, as we have seen, identification and treatment of high risk

individuals can be futile in preventing gun related deaths. But I believe we need to go further, and would propose a National Firearms Registry, in which all guns owned by individuals would be registered. This would be transparent to public purview, with registration occurring automatically (at the time of background check) with any firearm sale and voluntarily for all those owning guns. The population could be queried, perhaps in conjunction with our national census (? accelerated to 2014), enabled by the thousands of Americans moved by our recent tragedies who would gladly work for little or no pay in the registration effort. Violators of mandatory registration would be subject to significant penalties, and whistle blowers could be rewarded. There would be a fee for registration which could help to finance the effort, and federal funding would be added, making national registration the priority it deserves to be. Confirmation of mental and emotional fitness for gun ownership (within our clinical limits) would be part of biannual recertification. Is it possible that car registration—and paying for it—is more important than gun registration?

Would such a system be fool proof? Of course not. Naysayers will crow about only criminals having unregistered guns, and, for a while, this would be true. But controlling our gun problem is a process, and we need to start somewhere, and we need to start now. Free, unrestricted, unmonitored access to firearms is the gist of our gun problem, and a major threat to our public health. It is a massive social scourge, and demands mass action. To do less is to allow free access to guns to remain the plague of the 21st century.

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